Kavad I

(c. 488 – c. 496, c- 498/9 – c. 531)

BRIEFING

Kavad I (Middle Persian: 𐭪𐭥𐭲𐭠𐭣 Kawād; 473 – 13 September 531) was the Sasanian King of Kings of Iran from 488 to 531, with a two or three-year interruption. A son of Peroz I (r. 459–484), he was crowned by the nobles to replace his deposed and unpopular uncle Balash (r. 484–488).

Inheriting a declining empire where the authority and status of the Sasanian kings had largely ended, Kavad tried to reorganize his empire by introducing many reforms whose implementation was completed by his son and successor, Khosrow I. They were made possible by Kavad's use of the Mazdakite preacher Mazdak, leading to a social revolution that weakened the authority of the nobility and the clergy. Because of this, and the execution of the powerful king-maker Sukhra, Kavad was deposed and imprisoned in the Castle of Oblivion. He was replaced by his brother Jamasp. However, with the aid of his sister and an officer named Siyawush, Kavad and some of his followers fled east to the territory of the Hephthalite king, who provided him with an army. This enabled Kavad to restore himself to the throne in 498/9.

Bankrupted by this hiatus, Kavad applied for subsidies from the Byzantine emperor Anastasius I. The Byzantines had originally paid the Iranians voluntarily to maintain the defense of the Caucasus against attacks from the north. Anastasius refused the subsidies, which led Kavad to invade his domains, thus starting the Anastasian War. Kavad first seized Theodosiopolis and Martyropolis respectively, and then Amida after holding the city under siege for three months. The two empires made peace in 506, with the Byzantines agreeing to pay subsidies to Kavad for the maintenance of the fortifications on the Caucasus in return for Amida. Around this time, Kavad also fought a lengthy war against his former allies, the Hephthalites; by 513 he had re-taken the region of Khorasan from them.

In 528, the Iberian War erupted between the Sasanians and Byzantines in what is now eastern Georgia because the Byzantines refused to acknowledge Khosrow as Kavad's heir and because of a dispute over Lazica. Although Kavad's forces suffered two notable losses at the battles of Dara and Satala, the war was largely indecisive, with both sides suffering heavy losses. In 531, while the Sasanian army was besieging Martyropolis, Kavad died from an illness. He was succeeded by Khosrow I, who inherited a reinvigorated and mighty empire equal to that of the Byzantines.

Because of the many challenges and issues Kavad successfully overcame, he is considered one of the most effective and successful kings to rule the Sasanian Empire. In the words of the Iranologist Nikolaus Schindel, he was "a genius in his own right, even if of a somewhat Machiavellian type."

NAME

Due to increased Sasanian interest in Kayanian history, Kavad was named after the mythological Kayanian king Kavi Kavata. The name is transliterated in Greek as Kabates, Chü-he-to in Chinese, and Qubādh in Arabic. Qobād (also Ghobād with a ghayn instead of qaf) is the form used in New Persian.

BACKGROUND AND STATE OF SASSANIAN IRAN

The son of the Sasanian shah Peroz I (r. 459–484), Kavad was born in 473. The Sasanian family had been the monarchs of Iran since 224 after the triumph of the first Sasanian shah Ardashir I (r. 224–242) over the Parthian (Arsacid) Empire. Although Iranian society was greatly militarised and its elite designated themselves as a "warrior nobility" (arteshtaran), it still had a significantly smaller population, was more impoverished, and was a less centralized state compared to the Roman Empire. As a result, the Sasanian shahs had access to fewer full-time fighters, and depended on recruits from the nobility instead. Some exceptions were the royal cavalry bodyguard, garrison soldiers, and units recruited from places outside Iran.

The bulk of the high nobility included the powerful Parthian noble families (known as the wuzurgan) that were centered on the Iranian plateau. They served as the backbone of the Sasanian "feudal" army and were largely autonomous. The Sasanian shahs had noticeably little control over the wuzurgan; attempts to restrict their self-determination usually resulted in the murder of the shah. Ultimately, the Parthian nobility worked for the Sasanian shah for personal benefit, personal oath, and, conceivably, a common awareness of the "Aryan" (Iranian) kinship they shared with their Persian overlords.

Another vital component of the army was the Armenian cavalry, which was recruited from outside the ranks of the Parthian wuzurgan. However, the revolt of Armenia in 451 and the loss of its cavalry had weakened the Sasanians' attempts to keep the Hunnic tribes (i.e., the Hephthalites, Kidarites, Chionites and Alkhans) of the northeastern border in check. Indeed, Kavad's grandfather Yazdegerd II (r. 438–457) had managed to hold off the Kidarites during his wars against them, which had occupied him throughout most of his reign. Now, however, Sasanian authority in Central Asia began to decay.

First in 474 and again in the late 470s/early 480s, Peroz was defeated and captured by the Hephthalites. In his second defeat, he offered to pay thirty mule packs of silver drachms in ransom, but could only pay twenty. Unable to pay the other ten, he sent Kavad in 482 as a hostage to the Hephthalite court until he could pay the rest. He eventually managed to gain the ten mule packs of silver by imposing a poll tax on his subjects, and thus secured the release of Kavad before he mounted his third campaign in 484. There, Peroz was defeated and killed by a Hephthalite army, possibly near Balkh. His army was completely destroyed, and his body was never found. Four of his sons and brothers had also died. The main Sasanian cities of the eastern region of Khorasan−Nishapur, Herat and Marw were now under Hephthalite rule.

Sukhra, a member of the Parthian House of Karen, one of the Seven Great Houses of Iran, quickly raised a new force and stopped the Hephthalites from achieving further success. Peroz's brother, Balash, was elected as shah by the Iranian magnates, most notably Sukhra and the Mihranid general Shapur Mihran. However, Balash proved unpopular among the nobility and clergy who had him blinded and deposed after just four years in 488. Sukhra, who had played a key role in Balash's deposition, appointed Kavad as the new shah of Iran. According to Miskawayh (d. 1030), Sukhra was Kavad's maternal uncle.

FIRST REIGN

Accession and conditions of the empire

Kavad ascended the throne in 488 at the age of 15. His youth is emphasized on his coins, which show him with short whiskers. He inherited an empire that had reached its lowest ebb. The nobility and clergy exerted great influence and authority over the nation, and were able to act as king-makers, as seen by their choice to depose Balash. Economically, the empire was not doing well either, the result of drought, famine, and the crushing defeats delivered by the Hephthalites. They had not only seized large parts of its eastern provinces, but had also forced the Sasanians to pay vast amounts of tribute to them, which had depleted the royal treasury of the shah. Rebellions were occurring in the western provinces including Armenia and Iberia. Simultaneously, the country's peasant class was growing more and more uneasy and alienated from the elite.

Conflict with Sukhra over the empire

The young and inexperienced Kavad was tutored by Sukhra during his first five years as shah. During this period, Kavad was a mere figurehead, whilst Sukhra was the de facto ruler of the empire. This is emphasized by al-Tabari, who states that Sukhra "was in charge of government of the kingdom and the management of affairs ... [T]he people came to Sukhra and undertook all their dealings with him, treating Kavad as a person of no importance and regarding his commands with contempt." Numerous regions and the representatives of the elite paid tribute to Sukhra, not to Kavad. Sukhra controlled the royal treasury and the Iranian military. In 493, Kavad, having reached adulthood, wanted to put an end to Sukhra's dominance, and had him exiled to his native Shiraz in southwestern Iran. Even in exile, however, Sukhra was in control of everything except the kingly crown. He bragged about having put Kavad on the throne.

Alarmed by the thought that Sukhra might rebel, Kavad wanted to get rid of him completely. He lacked the manpower to do so, however, as the army was controlled by Sukhra and the Sasanians relied mainly on the military of the Seven Great Houses of Iran. He found his solution in Shapur of Ray, a powerful nobleman from the House of Mihran, and a resolute opponent of Sukhra. Shapur, at the head of an army of his own men and disgruntled nobles, marched to Shiraz, defeated Sukhra's forces, and imprisoned him in the Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon. Even in prison, Sukhra was considered too powerful and was executed. This caused displeasure among some prominent members of the nobility, weakening Kavad's status as shah. It also marked the temporary loss of authority of the House of Karen, whose members were exiled to the regions of Tabaristan and Zabulistan, which were away from the Sasanian court in Ctesiphon.

The Mazdakite movement and Kavad I’s deposition

According to classical sources, not long after Sukhra's execution, a mobad (priest) named Mazdak caught Kavad's attention. Mazdak was the chief representative of a religious and philosophical movement called Mazdakism. Not only did it consist of theological teachings, but it also advocated for political and social reforms that would impact the nobility and clergy.

The Mazdak movement was nonviolent and called for the sharing of wealth, women and property, an archaic form of communism. According to modern historians Touraj Daryaee and Matthew Canepa, 'sharing women' was most likely an overstatement and defamation deriving from Mazdak's decree that loosened marriage laws to help the lower classes. Powerful families saw this as a tactic to weaken their lineage and advantages, which was most likely the case. Kavad used the movement as a political tool to curb the power of the nobility and clergy. Royal granaries were distributed, and land was shared among the lower classes.

The historicity of the persona of Mazdak has been questioned. He may have been a fabrication to take the blame away from Kavad. Contemporary historians, including Procopius and Joshua the Stylite make no mention of Mazdak, naming Kavad as the figure behind the movement. Mention of Mazdak only emerges in later Middle Persian Zoroastrian documents, namely the Bundahishn, the Denkard, and the Zand-i Wahman yasn. Later Islamic-era sources, particularly al-Tabari, also mention Mazdak. These later writings were perhaps corrupted by Iranian oral folklore, given that blame put on Mazdak for the redistribution of aristocratic properties to the people, is a topic repeated in Iranian oral history. Other 'villains' in pre-Islamic Iranian history, namely Gaumata in the Behistun Inscription of the Achaemenid king Darius the Great (r. 522 – 486 BC) and Wahnam in the Paikuli inscription of the Sasanian king Narseh (r. 293–302), are frequently accused of similar misdeeds.

The nobility deposed Kavad in 496 for his support of the Mazdakites and his execution of Sukhra. They installed his more impressionable brother Jamasp on the throne.

IMPRISONMENT, FLIGHT AND RETURN

A council soon took place among the nobility to discuss what to do with Kavad. Gushnaspdad, a member of the Kanarangiyan, the family that held the important title of kanarang (military leader of Abarshahr), proposed Kavad be executed. His suggestion was overruled and Kavad was imprisoned instead in the Castle of Oblivion in Khuzestan. According to Procopius' account, Kavad's wife approached the commander of the prison. They came to an understanding that she would be allowed to see Kavad in exchange for sleeping with him. Kavad's friend, Siyawush, who was regularly in the same area as the prison, planned his friend's escape by preparing horses near the prison. Kavad changed clothes with his wife to disguise himself as a woman, and escaped from the prison and fled with Siyawush.

Tabari's account is different. He says that Kavad's sister helped him to escape by rolling him in a carpet, which she made the guard believe was soaked with her menstrual blood. The guard did not object or investigate the carpet, "fearing lest he become polluted by it". One of the authors of the Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire, John Robert Martindale, proposes she may have been Sambice, Kavad's sister-wife, who was the mother of his eldest son, Kawus.

Regardless, Kavad managed to escape imprisonment and fled to the court of the Hephthalite king, where he took refuge. According to the narratives included in the history of al-Tabari, during his flight Kavad met a peasant girl from Nishapur, named Niwandukht, who became pregnant with his child, who would ascend the throne as Khosrow I. However, the story has been dismissed as "fable" by the Iranologist Ehsan Yarshater. Khosrow's mother was in reality a noblewoman from the House of Ispahbudhan, one of the Seven Great Houses.

At the Hephthalite court in Bactria, Kavad gained the support of the Hephthalite king, and also married his daughter, who was Kavad's niece. During his stay, Kavad might have witnessed the rise of the Hephthalites to a better position than that of their former suzerains, the Kidarites. The present-day district of Qobadian (the Arabicized form of Kavadian) near Balkh, which was then under Hephthalite rule, was perhaps founded by Kavad and possibly served as his source of revenue. In 498 (or 499), Kavad returned to Iran with a Hephthalite army. When he crossed the domains of the Kanarangiyan in Khorasan, he was met by Adergoudounbades, a member of the family, who agreed to help him. Another noble who supported Kavad was Zarmihr Karen, a son of Sukhra.

Jamasp and the nobility and clergy did not resist as they wanted to prevent another civil war. They agreed that he would be king again with the understanding that he would not hurt Jamasp or the elite. Jamasp was spared, albeit probably blinded, while Gushnaspdad and other nobles who had plotted against Kavad were executed. Generally, however, Kavad secured his position by lenience. Adergoudounbades was appointed the new kanarang, while Siyawush was appointed the head of the Sasanian army (arteshtaran-salar). Another of Sukhra's sons, Bozorgmehr, was made Kavad's great minister (wuzurg framadar). Kavad's reclamation of his throne displays the troubled circumstances of the empire; a small force was able to overwhelm the nobility-clergy alliance.

SECOND REIGN

Reforms

Kavad's reign is noteworthy for his reforms, which he had been able to make with the nobility and clergy weakened by the Mazdakites. They would not be completed under his reign but were continued by his son, Khosrow I. The serious blows the Sasanians had suffered at the hands of the Hephthalites in the last quarter of the 5th century was a key reason behind the reforms the two made. Tax reform was implemented, a poll tax was created, and a review of taxable land was undertaken to ensure that taxation was fair. The empire was divided into four frontier regions (kust in Middle Persian), with a spāhbed (military commander) in charge of each district; a chancery was also added to keep the soldiers equipped.

Before Kavad and Khosrow's reforms, the Iranians' general (Eran-spahbed) managed the empire's army. Many of these military commanders were notably from the wuzurgan class of Parthia, indicating the continuation of their authority despite the efforts by Kavad and Khosrow. A new priestly office was also created known as the "advocate and judge of the poor" (driyōšān jādag-gōw ud dādwar), which assisted the clergy to help the poor and underprivileged, which they had possibly ignored previously.

As a result of the reforms, the power of the dehqans, a class of small land-owning magnates, increased substantially. The dehqans may have even been created by the reforms in the first place. A group of these dehqans was enlisted into a group of cavalry men, who were managed directly by the shah and earned steady wages. This was done to decrease the reliance on the Parthian cavalry. Soldiers were also enlisted from Sasanian allies, such as the Hephthalites, Arabs, and Daylamites. As a result, the newly rejuvenated Sasanian army proved successful in its efforts in subsequent decades. It sacked the Byzantine city of Antioch in 540, conquered Yemen in the 570s, and under the Parthian military commander Bahram Chobin defeated the Hephthalites and their allies, the Western Turkic Khaganate, in the Perso-Turkic war of 588–589.

Although the reforms were beneficial for the Empire, they may also have resulted in the decline of the traditional links between the aristocracy and the crown under Hormizd IV (r. 579–590) and Khosrow II (r. 590–628), to the degree that many belonging to the wuzurgan class, notably Bahram Chobin of the Mihran family, and later Shahrbaraz of the same family, were bold enough to dispute the legitimacy of the Sasanian family and lay claims to the throne.

Persecution of Mazdak and his followers

With his reforms under way by the 520s, Kavad no longer had any use for Mazdak and he officially stopped supporting the Mazdakites. A debate was arranged where not only the Zoroastrian priesthood but also Christian and Jewish leaders slandered Mazdak and his followers. According to the Shahnameh, written several centuries later by the medieval Persian poet Ferdowsi, Kavad had Mazdak and his supporters sent to Khosrow. His supporters were killed in a walled orchard, buried head first with only their feet visible. Khosrow then summoned Mazdak to look at his garden, saying: "You will find trees there that no-one has ever seen and no-one ever heard of even from the mouth of the ancient sages." Mazdak, seeing his followers' corpses, screamed and passed out. He was executed afterwards by Khosrow, who had his feet fastened on a gallows and had his men shoot arrows at Mazdak. The validity of the story is uncertain; Ferdowsi used much earlier reports of events to write the Shahnameh, and thus the story may report some form of contemporary memory.

Building projects

Many places were founded or re-built under Kavad. He is said to have founded the city Eran-asan-kerd-Kawad in Media; Fahraj in Spahan; and Weh-Kawad, Eran-win(n)ard-Kawad, Kawad-khwarrah, and Arrajan in Pars. He rebuilt Kirmanshah in Media, which he also used as one of his residences. He is also said to have founded a township in Meybod, which was named Haft-adhar ("seven fires"), because of a Zoroastrian fire temple being established there. Its original fire was created by fire brought from seven other temples in Pars, Balkh, Adurbadagan, Nisa, Spahan, Ghazni, and Ctesiphon.

In the Caucasus, Kavad had new fortifications built at Derbent, and ordered the construction of the Apzut Kawat wall (Middle Persian: *Abzūd Kawād, "Kavad increased [in glory]" or "has prospered"). The prominent Caucasian Albanian capital of Partaw, which had been rebuilt during the reign of Peroz I and named Perozabad ("the city of Peroz"), was fortified by Kavad and called Perozkavad ("victorious Kavad"). The former Albanian capital of Kabala, a large urban area that included the headquarters of one of the Albanian bishops, was also fortified by Kavad. He founded the city of Baylakan, which by most researchers is identified with the ruins of Oren-kala. Ultimately, these extensive buildings and fortifications transformed Caucasian Albania into a bastion of Iranian presence in the Caucasus.

The India trade

The Sasanians exerted considerable influence on trade in the region under Kavad.[76] By using the strategic location of the Persian Gulf, the Sasanians interfered to prevent Byzantine traders from taking take part in the India trade. They accomplished this either by bargaining with trade associates in the Indian subcontinent—ranging from the Gupta Empire in the north to the Anuradhapura monarchs of Sri Lanka in the south—or by attacking the Byzantine boats. Iranian traders were also able to seize Indian vessels well before they could make contact with Byzantine traders. These advantages resulted in the Iranian traders establishing something resembling a monopoly over the India trade.

The Anastasian war

The Sasanians and Byzantines had kept peace since the brief Byzantine–Sasanian War of 440. The last major war between the two empires had been during the reign of Shapur II (r. 309–379). However, war finally erupted in 502. Bankrupted by his hiatus in 496–498/9, Kavad applied for subsidies to the Byzantine Empire, who originally had paid the Iranians voluntarily to maintain the defense of the Caucasus against attacks from the north. The Iranians seemingly saw the money as a debt due to them. But now Emperor Anastasius I (r. 491–518) refused subsidies forcing Kavad to attempt to obtain the money by force. In 502, Kavad invaded Byzantine Armenia with a force that included Hephthalite soldiers. He captured Theodosiopolis, perhaps with local support; in any case, the city was undefended by troops and weakly fortified.

He then marched through southwestern Armenia, reportedly without facing any resistance, and entrusted local governor with the administration of the area. He proceeded to cross the Armenian Taurus, and reached Martyropolis, where its governor Theodore, surrendered without any resistance and gave Kavad two years' worth of taxes collected from the province of Sophene. Because of this, Kavad let Theodore keep his position as governor of the city. Kavad then besieged the fortress-city of Amida through the autumn and winter (502–503). The siege proved to be a far more difficult enterprise than Kavad had expected; the defenders, although unsupported by troops, repelled the Iranian assaults for three months before they were finally defeated.

He had its inhabitants deported to a city in southern Iran, which he named "Kavad's Better Amida" (Weh-az-Amid-Kawad). He left a garrison in Amida which included his general Glon, two marzbans (margraves) and 3,000 soldiers. The Byzantines failed in their attempt to recapture the city. Kavad then tried unsuccessfully to capture Edessa in Osroene. In 505 an invasion of Armenia by the Huns from the Caucasus led to an armistice; the Byzantines paid subsidies to the Iranians for the maintenance of the fortifications on the Caucasus, in return for Amida. The peace treaty was signed by the Ispahbudhan aristocrat Bawi, Kavad's brother-in-law. Although Kavad's first war with the Byzantines did not end with a decisive winner, the conquest of Amida was the greatest accomplishment achieved by a Sasanian force since 359, when the same city had been captured by Shapur II.

Relations with Christianity

Kavad's relationship with his Christian subjects is unclear. In Christian Iberia, where the Sasanians had earlier tried to spread Zoroastrianism, Kavad represented himself as an advocate of orthodox Zoroastrianism. In Armenia, however, he settled disputes with the Christians and appears to have continued Balash's peaceful approach. The Christians of Mesopotamia and Iran proper practised their religion without any persecution, despite the punishment of Christians in Iran proper being briefly mentioned c. 512/3. Like Jamasp, Kavad also supported the patriarch of the Church of the East, Babai, and Christians served in high offices at the Sasanian court. According to Eberhard Sauer, Sasanian monarchs only persecuted other religions when it was in their urgent political interests to do so.

According to the Chronicle of Seert and the historian Mari ibn Sulayman, Kavad ordered all the religious communities in the empire to submit written descriptions of their beliefs. This took place sometime before 496. In response to this command, the Patriarch Aqaq commissioned Elishaʿ bar Quzbaye, interpreter of the school of Nisibis, to write for the Church of the East. His work was then translated from Syriac to Middle Persian and presented to Kavad. This work has since been lost.

Kavad's reign marked a new turn in Sasanian–Christian relations; before his reign, Jesus had been seen solely as the defender of the Byzantines. This changed under Kavad. According to an apocryphal account in the Chronicle of Pseudo–Zachariah of Mytilene, written by an anonymous West Syrian monk at Amida in 569, Kavad saw a vision of Jesus whilst besieging Amida, which encouraged him to remain resolute in his effort. Jesus guaranteed to give him Amida within three days, which happened. Kavad's forces then sacked the city, taking much booty. The city's church was spared, however, due to the relationship between Kavad and Jesus. Kavad was even thought to have venerated a figure of Jesus. According to modern historian Richard Payne, the Sasanians could now be viewed as adherents of Jesus and his saints, if not Christianity itself.

Wars in the east

Not much is known about Kavad's wars in the east. According to Procopius, Kavad was forced to leave for the eastern frontier in 503 to deal with an attack by "hostile Huns", one of the many clashes in a reportedly lengthy war. After the Sasanian disaster in 484, all of Khorasan was seized by the Hephthalites; no Sasanian coins minted in the area (Nishapur, Herat, Marw) have been found from his first reign. The increase in the number of coins minted at Gorgan (which was now the northernmost Sasanian region) during his first reign may indicate a yearly tribute he paid to the Hephthalites. During his second reign, his fortunes changed. A Sasanian campaign in 508 led to the conquest of the Zundaber (Zumdaber) Castellum, associated with the temple of az-Zunin in the area of ad-Dawar, situated between Bust and Kandahar. A Sasanian coin dating to 512/3 has been found in Marw. This indicates the Sasanians under Kavad had managed to re-conquer Khorasan after successfully dealing with the Hephthalites.

Negotiations with the Romans over the adoption of Khosrow

Around 520 to secure the succession of his youngest son Khosrow, whose position was threatened by rival brothers and the Mazdakite sect, and to improve his relationship with the Byzantine emperor Justin I, Kavad proposed that he adopt Khosrow. This proposal was greeted initially with enthusiasm by the Byzantine emperor and his nephew, Justinian. However, Justinian's quaestor, Proclus, opposed the move concerned over the possibility that Khosrow might attempt to take over the Byzantine throne. The Byzantines made a counter-proposal to adopt Khosrow not as a Roman but as a barbarian. In the end the negotiations did not reach a consensus. Khosrow reportedly felt insulted by the Byzantines, and his attitude towards them deteriorated.

Mahbod and Siyawush were the Sasanian diplomats sent to negotiate with the Byzantines. Mahbod accused Siyawush of purposely sabotaging the negotiations. Further accusations were made against Siyawush, which included his reverence for new deities, and having his dead wife buried, a violation of Iranian law. Siyawush was thus most likely a Mazdakite, the religious sect that Kavad had originally, but now no longer, supported. Although Siyawush was a close friend of Kavad and had helped him escape imprisonment, Kavad did not try to prevent his execution. Seemingly, his purpose was to restrict Siyawush's immense authority as the head of the Sasanian army, a post which was disliked by the other nobles. Siyawush was executed, and his office was abolished. Despite the breakdown of the negotiations, it was not until 530 that full-scale warfare on the main western frontier broke out. In the intervening years, the two sides preferred waging war by proxy, through Arab allies in the south and Huns in the north.

Iberian war

Hostility between the two powers erupted into conflict once again in 528, just a year after the new Byzantine emperor Justinian I (r. 527–565) had been crowned. This was supposedly the result of the Byzantines not acknowledging Khosrow as Kavad's heir. According to the Greek chronicler John Malalas, military clashes first took place in Lazica, which had been disputed between the two empires since 522. Not long after this the battles also spread down to Mesopotamia, where the Byzantines suffered a heavy defeat near the border. In 530, one of the famous open-field battles took place between the Byzantine and Sasanian troops at Dara.

The Sasanian army led by Perozes, Pityaxes and Baresmanas suffered a severe defeat. The battle did not, however, bring an end to the conflict. The following year Kavad raised an army, which he sent under Azarethes to invade the Byzantine province of Commagene. When the Byzantine army under Belisarius approached, Azarethes and his men withdrew east, halting at Callinicum. In the ensuing battle the Byzantines suffered a heavy defeat, but Iranian losses were so great Kavad was displeased with Azarethes, and relieved him of his command. In 531, the Iranians besieged Martyropolis. During the siege, however, Kavad became ill and died on 13 September. As a result, the siege was lifted and peace was made between Kavad's successor Khosrow I and Justinian.

IBERIAN WAR

The Iberian War was fought from 526 to 532 between the Byzantine Empire and the Sasanian Empire over the eastern Georgian kingdom of Iberia—a Sasanian client state that defected to the Byzantines. Conflict erupted among tensions over tribute and the spice trade.

The Sasanians maintained the upper hand until 530 but the Byzantines recovered their position in battles at Dara and Satala while their Ghassanid allies defeated the Sasanian-aligned Lakhmids. A Sasanian victory at Callinicum in 531 continued the war for another year until the empires signed the "Perpetual Peace".

Origin

After the Anastasian War, a seven-year truce was agreed on, yet it lasted for nearly twenty years. Even during the war in 505, Emperor Anastasius I had already started fortifying Dara as a counter to the Persian fortress city of Nisibis for a looming conflict. During the reign of Justin I, investment in fortification efforts were increased in Dara.

Fearing the security of his succession, the elderly Kavadh I (r. 488–531) proposed the adoption of his favoured son Khosrow I by the Emperor Justin I. Whilst initially optimistic of the proposal, Procopius writes that Justin's quaestor Proklos advised against an adoption out of a fear that Khosrow could use it as pretext to claim the Roman Empire. Justin would instead request a barbarian adoption, by an attire of arms, which would offend Khosrow.

Tensions in the region were compounded by religious affiliations. Lazica, a Christian Kingdom typically allied with the Persians, converted to Christianity and shifted allegiances to the Romans. Their king symbolically adopted Emperor Justin as his godfather.] This shift motivated other Christian kingdoms in the Caucasus, such as Iberia, to defect from Persia.

According to Procopius, Kavadh I tried to force the Christian Iberians to become Zoroastrians, and in 523, under the leadership of Gourgen, they rose in revolt against Persia, following the example of the neighboring Christian kingdom of Lazica. Gourgen received pledges by Justin I that he would defend Iberia. Procopius consistently uses religious motifs, contrasting the Zoroastrian Persian's barbarism with the Christian Roman's civility.

As part of his strategic consolidation of power in the East, Justinian further solidified border defences, incorporating Armenian provinces into the empire and stationing Roman garrisons in the area. Additionally, he aligned pro-Roman Arab clans under the Christian Jafnid Clan, whose leader was appointed king, providing a buffer zone between Rome and Persia.

War

Violence escalated at various points where the power of the two empires met: in 525 a Roman fleet transported an Aksumite army to conquer Himyarite Yemen and in 525–526, Persia's Arab allies, the Lakhmids, raided Roman territories on the edge of the desert. The Romans were interested in gaining influence in Yemen to protect Christian interests there (see Christian community of Najran) as well as to dominate the spice and silk trade routes to India which were under Persian control.

By 526–527, overt fighting between the two empires had broken out in the Transcaucasus region and upper Mesopotamia. Following the emperor Justin I's death in 527, Justinian I acceded to the imperial throne. The early years of war favored the Persians, by 527 the Iberian revolt had been crushed, a Roman offensive against Nisibis and Thebetha in that year failed and forces attempting to fortify Thannuris and Melabasa were prevented from doing so by Persian attacks.

In 528, the Persians pressed on from Iberia to capture forts in eastern Lazica. Attempting to remedy the deficiencies revealed by these Persian successes, Justinian reorganised the eastern armies by dividing the command of the magister militum of the East in two and appointing a separate magister militum of Armenia over the northern portion. Belisarius's forces were defeated by Xerxes during the battle of Thannuris and he had to retreat to Dara.

In response to damaging raids on Syria by the Lakhmids from 528 to 529, Justinian reorganised the loose network of Arab rulers employed by the Romans under the sole leadership of Ghassanid leader Al-Harith ibn Jabalah, who was raised to the rank of Vir gloriosus. Such reform mirrored the more centralised approach of Persia, whose own Arabic clients had been organised under Lakhmid leader Al-Mundhir III ibn al-Nu'man.

In 530, Belisarius led the Romans to victory over a much larger Persian force under Perozes at the Battle of Dara, while Sittas and Dorotheus defeated a Persian army under Mihr-Mihroe at the Battle of Satala. In 531, Belisarius was defeated by Persian and Lakhmid forces at the Battle of Callinicum but during the summer, the Romans captured some forts in Armenia and repulsed a Persian offensive. The Roman failure at Callinicum was followed by a commission of inquiry; Belisarius was dismissed from his post. Azarethes, the Persians' commander at Callinicum, was also stripped of his ranks due to his failure to capture any significant fortification.

The Battle of Dara

The Battle of Dara was fought between the Eastern Roman Empire and the Sasanians in 530 AD. It was one of the battles of the Iberian War.

Procopius's account of this engagement is among the most detailed descriptions of a late Roman battle.

The Byzantine Empire was at war with the Sasanians from 527, supposedly because Kavadh I had tried to force the Iberians to become Zoroastrians. The Iberian king fled from Kavadh, but Kavadh tried to make peace with the Byzantines, and attempted to have Justin I adopt his son Khosrau. Justin agreed, but on the terms that he would do so only in a rite reserved for barbarians. This failed to satisfy Kavadh, who attacked Byzantine allies, so Justin sent his generals Sittas and Belisarius into Persia, where they were initially defeated. In 529, the failed negotiations of Justin's successor Justinian prompted a Sasanian expedition of 40,000 men towards Dara. The next year, Belisarius was sent back to the region alongside Hermogenes and an army; Kavadh answered with another 10,000 troops under the general Perozes, who set up camp about five kilometers away at Ammodius, in the near vicinity of Dara.

The Persians, outnumbering the Romans by 15,000 men, deployed around 20 stades away from the town of Daras and drew up their battle lines. Despite being outnumbered, Belisarius decided to give battle. He dug a number of ditches to block the Persian cavalry, leaving gaps between them to allow a counterattack. According to Irfan Shahid, the tactic was adopted from the Persians at the Battle of Thannuris two years earlier. These were pushed forward on either flank of his position, while his center was held back. Here he placed his unreliable infantry behind the center ditch, being placed close enough to the walls of the fortress to provide supporting fire from the city battlements. On the left and right flanks were the Byzantine cavalry, of questionable quality. Supporting them on their interior flanks were small bodies of Huns: 300 Hun cavalry under Sunicas and Aigan supporting the left; and as many more Huns on the right under Simmas and Ascan. Belisarius also placed a body of Heruli cavalry under Pharas in ambush position off his left flank. A reserve composed of his own bucellarii household cavalry was held behind his center and commanded by John the Armenian, his trusted lieutenant and boyhood friend.

On the first day, according to Procopius, there was no general engagement, but instead a series of challenge fights between champions of both sides. One particular combat involved a Persian knight, who challenged Belisarius to single combat; but was instead met by a Byzantine bath slave named Andreas. Andreas, who had been secretly training with Belisarius' own household troopers, killed not only this Persian champion, but also a second challenger later in the day. The Persians then withdrew to Ammodius for the night. Some authors, however, have expressed doubt as to the pure historicity of Procopius' account and state that while instances of single combat did likely occur during the course of the battle, Procopius' description is intended to be a narrative device rather than a factual account. Another source, believed to be based on official documents, does indeed reference individual combat, but makes no mention of Andreas and, furthermore, places any single combat engagements at a different stage of the battle.

After the first day of skirmishes, Belisarius sent a letter to the Persian commander. Rather than fight a battle, he believed it was best to avoid conflict and instead insisted that their disputes be settled by discussion. The letter read, "The first blessing is peace, as is agreed by all men who have even a small share of reason. ... The best general, therefore, is that one which is able to bring about peace from war." The letter either fell on deaf ears or Perozes already wanted to negotiate which eventually failed, the battle resumed. The Persians already thought of the Byzantine army as a second-rate army; this letter, along with his numerical superiority, likely made Perozes even more confident of victory. In his book on Belisarius, Brogna merely says that Belisarius sent the letter because of his good moral character. Mahon claims in his book that Belisarius doubted his chance of victory and this is why he sent the letter.

On the second day of the battle, 10,000 more Persian troops arrived from Nisibis. The Sassanid and Byzantine light infantry exchanged fire resulting in minor casualties on each side. As Procopius describes, "At first, then, both sides discharged arrows against each other, and the missiles by their great number made, as it were, a vast cloud; and many men were falling on both sides, but the missiles of the barbarians flew much more thickly. For fresh men were always fighting in turn, affording to their enemy not the slightest opportunity to observe what was being done; but even so the Romans did not have the worst of it. For a steady wind blew from their side against the barbarians, and checked to a considerable degree the force of their arrows." Depending on the source, either the Persians got the best of the Romans, the fight was fairly equal or the Persians suffered more. Then the Persians formed two lines: the right flank under Pityaxes and the left under Baresmanas.

At this time of the day the temperature of the region has been estimated to have been particularly hot, probably around 45 °C (113 °F).

The first wave of the Persian attack was directed against the Byzantine left flank. The Persians forced a crossing of the ditch, pushing back the Byzantine cavalry. But the intervention of Sunicas' Huns attacking from the interior of the Byzantine line, as well as Pharas' Herulians attacking out of ambush from the opposite side, forced the Persians' wing to retreat.

The Persians then attacked the Byzantine right wing, where Perozes sent the Sassanid Zhayedan, also known as the Immortals, who were the elite Persian armored lancers. The Byzantine cavalry and infantry defending the ditch were pushed back here as they had been on the left. But Belisarius counterattacked with his reserve Bucellari cavalry, and split the Persian troops in two. Half the Persians pursued the Byzantine cavalry, but the rest were trapped, and Baresmanas was killed along with 5,000 other men. The Byzantine cavalry also recovered and routed their pursuers. Belisarius allowed a pursuit for a few miles, but let the majority of Persian survivors escape.

Following the defeat, the Sasanians under Spahbod Azarethes together with their client Lakhmids started another invasion, this time, unexpectedly, via Commagene. Belisarius foiled their plan by swift maneuvering and forced the Persians, who were retreating, into a heavy battle at Callinicum in which the Byzantines were defeated, but with heavy casualties on both sides. The Byzantines eventually paid tributes in exchange for a peace treaty.

In 540 and 544 Dara was attacked by Khosrau I, who was unable to take it either time. Khosrau finally captured it in 573; its fall was said to have caused Justin II to go insane. Justin's wife Sophia and his friend Tiberius Constantine took control of the empire until Justin died in 578. Meanwhile, the Persians were able to march further into the empire, but Khosrau died in 579.

Maurice defeated the Persians at Dara in 586 and recaptured the fortress, but the Persians under Khosrau II defeated the Byzantines in 604. This time, the Persians destroyed the city, but the Byzantines later rebuilt it in 628. In 639 the Muslim Arabs captured it, and it remained in their hands until 942 when it was sacked by the Byzantines. It was sacked again by John I Tzimiskes in 958, but the Byzantines never recaptured it.

Truce

Justinian's envoy, Hermogenes, visited Kavadh to re-open negotiations but without success. Justinian tried to form an alliance with the Axumites of Ethiopia and the Himyarites of Yemen against the Persians but his alliance proposal failed. The Persians conducted the Siege of Martyropolis but abandoned it as Kavadh died shortly afterwards.

In spring 532 negotiations progressed after the succession of King Khosrow I, who needed to devote attention to domestic threats. Justinian too favoured an early end to the war, potentially viewing dynastic instability in Vandalic Africa and Ostrogothic Italy as encouragement to reallocate Roman forces in the east towards the western Mediterranean. Negotiations concluded with the agreement of Eternal Peace, whereby all territories seized during the war by either side were returned and the Dux of eastern forces moved from Dara to Constantia. However, the Byzantines paid a tribute of 11,000 lbs (5000 kg) gold to the Sasanian Empire.

COINS

The provinces of Gorgan, Khuzestan, and Asoristan provided the most Sasanian coinage for Kavad during his reign. His reign marks the introduction of distinctive traits on the obverse sides of the coin which includes astral symbols, particularly, a crescent on both of his shoulders, and a star in the left corner. The reverse side shows the traditional fire altar flanked by two attendants facing it in veneration. Kavad used the title of kay (Kayanian) on his coins, a title that had been used since the reign of his grandfather Yazdegerd II (r. 438–457). Kavad was, however, the last Sasanian shah to have kay inscribed on his coins—the last one issued in 513. The regular obverse inscription on his coins simply has his name; in 504, however, the slogan abzōn ("may he prosper/increase") was added.

SUCCESSION

According to Procopius and other historians, Kavad had written a succession plan that favoured Khosrow just before his death. Historian John Malalas stated that Kavad crowned Khosrow himself. However, at the beginning of Khosrow's reign in 531, Bawi and other members of the Iranian aristocracy became involved in a conspiracy to overthrow Khosrow and make Kavad, the son of Kavad's second eldest son Jamasp, the shah of Iran. Upon learning of the plot, Khosrow executed all of his brothers and their offspring, as well as Bawi and the other nobles who were involved.

Khosrow also ordered the execution of Kavad, who was still a child, and was away from the court, being raised by Adergoudounbades. He sent orders to kill Kavad, but Adergoudounbades disobeyed and secretly raised him until he was betrayed to the shah in 541 by his own son, Bahram. Khosrow had him executed, but Kavad, or someone claiming to be him, managed to flee to the Byzantine Empire.

LEGACY

Kavad's reign is considered a turning point in Sasanian history. Since he successfully handled many challenges and issues, he is considered one of the most effective and successful kings to rule the Sasanian Empire. In the words of Iranologist Nikolaus Schindel he was "a genius in his own right, even if of a somewhat Machiavellian type." He was successful in his efforts to reinvigorate his declining empire, paving the way for a smooth transition to his son Khosrow I, who inherited a powerful empire. Khosrow improved it further during his reign, becoming one of the most popular shahs of Iran and earning the epithet Anushirvan ("the immortal soul").

The Ziyarid dynasty, which mainly ruled over Tabaristan and Gorgan between 931 and 1090, claimed that the founder of the dynasty, Mardavij (r. 930–935), was descended from Kavad.